



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

TESTIMONY

STATEMENT BEFORE THE HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE ON READYING THE U.S. MILITARY FOR FUTURE WAR

January 30, 2018

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Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith, and distinguished members of the Committee: thank you for your invitation to appear before you today to discuss the need to prepare the U.S. military for the challenges of future war.

This is a vitally important topic. In recent years it has become apparent that we are living in a world characterized by peacetime competition between the United States, China, and Russia. Both the *National Security Strategy* and the *National Defense Strategy* have rightfully emphasized this.

Of course, competition is not the same thing as conflict. Nor does competition necessarily lead to conflict. It must be admitted, however, that in addition to the reality of great-power competition, we face an increasing possibility of great-power war. The possibility is remote, but not inconceivable, and it is growing. What was once a hypothetical future contingency is now a real, and present, danger.

This is significant for three reasons. *First*, and most obviously, the consequences of a war between the United States and China or Russia would be enormous. It would be one of the most consequential events of the 21st century, with implications for world order. *Second*, great power conflict is largely outside the professional experience of senior civilian policy makers and military leaders. It has been a quarter century since we have thought seriously about great-power war: a professional lifetime in the military and civil service. Much of the expertise that we once possessed – in government, the policy community, and academia – is gone.

Third, the armed forces that the United States and its allies possess today were developed for very different circumstances than we face today and will face in the future. While the United States was focused on defeating insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia and China were focused on acquiring capabilities to defeat us. As a result, we find ourselves a step behind in a number of key warfighting areas.

Thus for the first time in decades, we face the need to think seriously about great-power war. Indeed, *I believe that that the requirements of great-power war should be the most important test of the adequacy of our force structure and posture.*

A war between the United States and China or Russia would literally be without precedent. It would feature adversaries armed with nuclear weapons and precision strike systems and would likely include operations not only on land, in the air, and on and under the seas, but also in space and cyberspace. Such a war would likely look much different than recent wars.

- It might be short, particularly if an adversary were able to achieve a *fait accompli*, but might just as well be protracted, particularly if the United States and its allies achieve initial success.
- It would likely feature high expenditure of weapon systems and munitions and could result in high attrition, and consequently the need for social and industrial mobilization to support the war.
- Nor would the U.S. homeland necessarily be a sanctuary. It would likely feature non-kinetic and likely kinetic attacks on the United States as well as enemy forces deployed off our coasts and potentially near our borders.
- It would likely include efforts to undermine our willingness and ability to fight by sowing discord and exploiting cleavages in our society.
- It would also likely feature military operations in space against U.S. and allied satellites.
- And it could ultimately lead to the disruption of the global economic system.

What are the sorts of things that we need to do to prepare for such a war, if only to convince a potential aggressor of that it would be fruitless to take on the United States and its allies and thus enhance deterrence?

First, we need to field armed forces that possess depth and resilience to be able to fight, accept damage, and recover. Today, our forces lack readiness and are in dire need of modernization. Moreover, from the bottom to the top, our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines have grown used to fighting terrorists and insurgents and are unfamiliar with the challenges of great-power war.

Second, we need a defense industrial base, and a national security innovation base, that is capable of supporting protracted operations. For two decades, the watchword has been “efficiency” rather than “effectiveness.” Moreover, in a globalized, interdependent world, we need to think carefully about foreign investment in strategic industries that bear on defense.

Third, we need a logistical system capable of operating in contested environments. Getting needed men and materiel from the United States and U.S. forward bases and staging areas to the battlefield will be an increasing challenge.

Fourth, we will face a growing need to defend the United States, to include our networks and military bases, as well as our space assets.

Fifth, we will need to develop ways to identify and counter foreign efforts to influence our society, and that of our allies. Russia and China have been practicing political warfare on us for some time, and the magnitude of those efforts is only now becoming apparent. We need to develop countermeasures and responses to those efforts.

Here and in other areas, past experience can both inform and mislead us. There are clearly areas where we need to re-learn lost skills, to include logistics and mobilization. But we should not mindlessly ape past behavior. Great-power competition in the 21st century will not be a replay of the Cold War, and a future great-power war will not be a rerun of World War II, or the never-fought World War III between the United States and the Soviet Union. Instead, we need to assess thoughtfully the similarities to and differences with the past and rebuild (and in some cases just build) intellectual capital and capabilities to deal with the era that we are in, and are likely to be in for the foreseeable future.

About the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) is an independent, nonpartisan policy research institute established to promote innovative thinking and debate about national security strategy and investment options. CSBA's analysis focuses on key questions related to existing and emerging threats to U.S. national security, and its goal is to enable policymakers to make informed decisions on matters of strategy, security policy, and resource allocation.